

**VEHICLE OPERATION CONTROL METHOD AND VEHICLE OPERATION CONTROL
APPARATUS**

Cross-Reference To Related Application

5 The present application claims priority under 35 U.S.C.
§119 to Japanese Patent Application No. JP2002-203421. The
contents of these applications are incorporated herein by
reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001]

1. Field of the Invention

15 The present invention relates to a vehicle operation control
method and vehicle operation control apparatus for controlling
an actual steering angle of a driven wheel based on a steering
angle of a steering wheel and vehicle velocity.

[0002]

20 **2. Description of Related Art**

As a vehicle operation control apparatus including a
transmission ratio changing mechanism for changing the
transmission ratio by driving a motor, provided halfway of a
steering transmission system which connects a steering wheel
25 to driven wheels, a vehicle operation control apparatus 100 which
comprises a steering wheel 21, a first steering shaft 22, a second
steering shaft 23, an EPS actuator 24, a rod 25, a steering angle
sensor 26, a vehicle velocity sensor 27, a torque sensor 28,
an EPS ECU 30, a gear ratio changing mechanism 32 (transmission
30 ratio changing mechanism), a VGRS ECU 40 and the like, as shown
in Fig. 1, is available. In the meantime, such "a transmission
ratio changing mechanism for changing a transmission ratio by
driving an electric motor, located halfway of a steering
transmission system which connects the steering wheel to the

driven wheels" is sometimes called variable gear ratio system (referred to as VGRS, hereinafter) depending on a case.

[0003]

That is, an end of the first steering shaft 22 is connected
5 to the steering wheel 21 and an input side of the gear ratio
changing mechanism 32 is connected to the other end side of this
first steering shaft 22. This gear ratio changing mechanism
32 comprises a motor, a reduction gear and the like. An end
side of the second steering shaft 23 is connected to this output
10 side of the gear ration changing mechanism and an input side
of the EPS actuator 24 is connected to the other end side of
the second steering shaft 23. The EPS actuator 24 is an electric
type powered steering system, which is capable of converting
a rotary motion inputted by the second steering shaft 23 through
15 a rack and pinion gear (not shown) to a motion in the axial
direction of the rod 25 and outputting it. Further, this EPS
actuator 24 generates an assist force depending on a steering
condition by means of an assist motor which is controlled by
the EPS ECU 30 so as to assist steering by a driver. In the
20 meantime, this rod 25 is mounted on driven wheels FR, FL.

[0004]

A rotation angle (steering angle) of the first steering shaft
22 is detected by a steering angle sensor 26 and inputted to
the VGRS ECU 40 as a steering angle signal. A steering torque
25 by the second steering shaft 23 is detected by a torque sensor
28 and inputted to the EPS ECU 30 as a torque signal. Further,
a vehicle velocity is detected by a vehicle velocity sensor 27
and inputted to the EPS ECU 30 and VGRS ECU 40 as a vehicle velocity
signal. Additionally, the EPS actuator 24 contains a tire angle
30 sensor (not shown) capable of detecting a tire angle (actual
steering angle) from a moving amount of rod 25.

[0005]

With such a structure, ratio between input gear and output
gear is changed depending on vehicle velocity at real tim by

means of a motor and reduction gear in the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 and VGRS ECU 40 so as to change a ratio of output angle of the second steering shaft 23 relative to the steering angle of the first steering shaft 22. The EPS actuator 24 and the EPS ECU 30 generate an assist force for assisting steering of the vehicle driver by means of an assist motor depending on vehicle driver's steering condition and vehicle velocity detected by means of the torque sensor 28 and the vehicle velocity sensor 27.

10 [0006]

Consequently, the steering gear ratio corresponding to the vehicle velocity can be set. For example, an output angle to a second steering shaft 23 by the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 can be set to be increased with respect to the steering angle of the steering wheel at the time of vehicle stop or traveling at a low velocity. Further, the output angle of the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 can be set to be decreased with respect to the steering angle of the steering wheel 21 at the time of traveling at a high velocity. Meanwhile, an appropriate assist force corresponding to the vehicle velocity can be generated by means of an assist motor.

[0007]

For example, if a vehicle is stopped or traveling at a low velocity, the steering gear ratio by the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 is set low and an assist force is intensified by an assist motor, so that the driven wheels can be steered largely even with a light steering operation. This facilitates the steering operation of a vehicle driver. On the other hand, if the vehicle is traveling at a high velocity, the assist force by the assist motor drops and the steering ratio by the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 is set high. Consequently, the steering operation becomes heavy and even if the steering wheel 21 is turned largely, it comes that the driven wheels are steered a little. Consequently, it can be expected that vehicle control

stability is further improved.

[0008]

However, in such a vehicle operation control apparatus 100, a steering gear ratio is set up corresponding to a vehicle velocity by a gear ratio changing mechanism 32 controlled by the VGRS ECU 40. Thus, when a vehicle driver executes a quick steering by turning the steering wheel 21 suddenly, a follow-up delay by the control of the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 occurs. Consequently, because the steering control on the driven wheels FR, FL continues toward an object angle even after the vehicle driver terminates his steering operation, the vehicle driver is provided with a feeling of disharmony in his driving operation, thereby the steering feeling being worsened.

[0009]

Thus, in order to prevent the steering feeling from being worsened due to this follow-up delay, the JP 11-208499 A has proposed a "vehicle steering apparatus" in which if a control deviation between an object rotation angle by a transmission ratio changing mechanism and its output angle exceeds a predetermined threshold, this control deviation is adjusted so as to block the control deviation from exceeding a predetermined threshold.

[0010]

With such a structure, when the steering wheel 21 is turned back slowly at the time of its turning-back even if it is turned suddenly at the time of its additional turning, a difference in steering amount of driven wheels FR, FL occurs although the same amount steering operation is executed at the times of the additional turning and turning-back. Thus, even if a vehicle driver returns the steering wheel 21 to its neutral position, the driven wheels FR, FL are not returned to the neutral position, so that the neutral position is deviated. Consequently, the vehicle driver is supplied with a feeling of disharmony in his steering, thereby the steering feeling being worsened.

[0011]

JP 2000-344121 A has proposed a "vehicle steering control apparatus" in which the control deviation between the object angle and output angle of the VGRS adjusted at the time of a quick steering is memorized and when the steering wheel 21 is operated, its phase is corrected gradually so that this memorized control deviation becomes zero, thereby the deviation in the neutral position being corrected. However, even with such a structure, the deviation in the neutral position just after the quick steering cannot be blocked because correction of the deviation in the phase is carried out gradually.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0012]

Accordingly, the present invention has been achieved to solve the above-described problem and an object of the present invention is to provide a vehicle operation control method and vehicle operation control apparatus capable of improving the steering feeling.

[0013]

In order to achieve the above object, according to the present invention, a vehicle operation control method for controlling an actual steering angle of driven wheels based on a steering angle by a steering wheel and vehicle velocity, comprising:

a first step of obtaining a steering angle velocity based on the steering angle by the steering wheel;

a second step of obtaining the actual steering angle of the driven wheels;

a third step of controlling a variable gain based on the vehicle velocity, the steering angle, the steering angle velocity and the actual steering angle;

a fourth step of multiplying the variable gain with the steering angle; and

a fifth step of controlling the actual steering angle of the driven wheels based on a result of multiplication in the fourth step.

[0014]

5 Further, in order to achieve the above object, according to the present invention, a vehicle operation control apparatus for controlling an actual steering angle of driven wheels based on a steering angle by a steering wheel and vehicle velocity, comprising:

10 a steering angle velocity obtaining means for obtaining a steering angle velocity based on the steering angle by the steering wheel;

an actual steering angle obtaining means for obtaining the actual steering angle of the driven wheels;

15 a variable gain control means for controlling a variable gain based on the vehicle velocity, the steering angle, the steering angle velocity and the actual steering angle;

a multiplying means for multiplying the variable gain with the steering angle; and

20 an actual steering angle control means for controlling the actual steering angle of the driven wheels based on a result of multiplication by the multiplying means.

[0015]

25 According to the present invention, the variable gain controlled based on the vehicle velocity, the steering angle, the steering angle velocity and the actual steering angle is multiplied with the steering angle and the actual steering angle of the driven wheels is controlled based on a result of this multiplication. Consequently, it comes that the variable gain
30 is controlled based on not only the vehicle velocity but also the steering angle, the steering angle velocity and the actual steering angle and thus, the gain control which depends upon not only the vehicle velocity but also the steering angle, the steering angle velocity and the actual steering angle can be

executed. That is, as compared to a case where the variable gain is controlled based on only the vehicle velocity, the variable gain can be controlled based on the steering angle velocity by the steering wheel, the turning direction or the actual steering angle of the driven wheels as well. For example, it can be so set up that at the time of additional turning, the follow-up delay in the actual angle control of the driven wheels due to a quick steering is corrected and that at the time of turning-back, a deviation in the neutral position of the steering wheel is corrected. Therefore, the steering feeling can be improved.

[0016]

Further, in accordance with the more preferred teaching of the present invention, the third step comprises:

a 3a step of judging which the turning direction of the steering wheel is in an additional turning direction which increases the steering angle or in a turning-back direction which decreases the steering angle, based on the steering angle and the steering angle velocity; and

a 3b step of if the turning direction of the steering wheel judged in the 3a step is the additional turning direction, selecting an additional turning time variable gain as the variable gain and if the turning direction is the turning-back direction, selecting the turning-back time variable gain as the variable gain.

[0017]

Still further, in accordance with the more preferred teaching of the present invention, the variable gain control means comprises:

a turning direction judgment means for judging which the turning direction of the steering wheel is in an additional turning direction which increases the steering angle or in a turning-back direction which decreases the steering angle, based on the steering angle and the steering angle velocity; and

a variable gain selection control means for, if the turning direction of the steering wheel judged by the turning direction judgment means is the additional turning direction, selecting an additional turning time variable gain as the variable gain and if the turning direction is the turning-back direction, selecting the turning-back time variable gain as the variable gain.

[0018]

In accordance with the more preferred teaching of the present invention, in controlling the variable gain based on the vehicle velocity, the steering angle, the steering angle velocity and the actual steering angle, which the turning direction of the steering wheel is additional turning direction which increases the steering angle or turning-back direction which decreases the steering angle is judged based on the steering angle and the steering angle velocity. Then, if it is judged that the turning direction of the steering wheel is the additional turning direction, an additional turning time variable gain is selected as the variable gain and if it is judged that the turning direction is the turning-back direction, the turning-back time variable gain is selected as the variable gain. Consequently, the additional turning time variable gain or the turning-back time variable gain set up individually can be selected depending on the turning direction of the steering wheel. Thus, it can be so set up that the additional turning time variable gain corrects the follow-up delay in the actual steering angle control of the driven wheels due to a quick steering and that the turning-back time variable gain corrects the deviation in the neutral position of the steering wheel. Thus, the steering feeling can be improved both at the times of the additional turning and turning-back.

[0019]

In accordance with the more preferred teaching of the present invention, as for the additional turning time variable

gain of the third step, the variable gain is determined based on the vehicle velocity and the steering angle velocity and as for the turning-back time variable gain of the third step, the variable gain is determined based on the steering angle and the actual steering angle.

[0020]

Further, in accordance with the more preferred teaching of the present invention as for the additional turning time variable gain by the variable gain control means, that variable gain is determined based on the vehicle velocity and the steering angle velocity and as for the turning-back time variable gain by the variable gain control means, that variable gain is determined based on the steering angle and the actual steering angle.

[0021]

In accordance with the more preferred teaching of the present invention, as for the additional turning time variable gain, the variable gain is determined based on the vehicle velocity and the steering angle velocity and as for the turning-back time variable gain, the variable gain is determined based on the steering angle and the actual steering angle. Consequently, because the additional turning time variable gain is determined based on not only the vehicle velocity but also the steering angle velocity, the additional turning time variable gain can be determined corresponding to the steering angle velocity attained by the steering wheel. Further, because as for the turning-back time variable gain, the variable gain is determined based on the steering angle and the actual steering angle regardless of the vehicle velocity, the turning-back time variable gain can be determined according to a ratio between the both such that the driven wheels are located at a neutral position when the steering wheel is located at the neutral position. Therefore, the steering feeling can be improved both at the time of the additional turning and turning-back.

[0022]

In the meantime, the additional turning time variable gain may be determined based on a product between a first gain characteristic set up according to increase/decrease of the vehicle velocity and a second gain characteristic which decreases following an increase in the steering angle velocity. Further, as for the turning-back time variable gain, that variable gain may be determined based on a result obtained by dividing a current actual steering angle corresponding to the steering angle by the steering angle.

[0023]

Consequently, because the gain is decreased by the second gain characteristic following an increase in the steering angle velocity at the time of additional turning, the additional turning time variable gain at the time of a quick steering can be decreased by the product between the first gain characteristic and the second gain characteristic. Thus, a follow-up delay of the vehicle operation control due to a quick steering at the time of the additional turning can be suppressed, thereby the steering feeling being improved. Further, because the variable gain value is determined based on a result obtained by dividing a current actual steering angle corresponding to the steering angle by the steering angle when the steering wheel is turned back, the steering wheel can be turned back by an amount corresponding to the current actual steering angle. Therefore, because the steering wheel can be located at the neutral position after it is turned back, a deviation in the neutral position can be suppressed, thereby the steering feeling being improved.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is an explanatory diagram showing schematically the structure of the vehicle operation control apparatus;

FIG. 2 is a functional block diagram showing the vehicle operation control processing by the EPS ECU and VGRS ECU of the vehicle operation control apparatus of the embodiment;

FIG. 3 is a functional block diagram showing a basic functional configuration of the vehicle operation control processing which is applied to the VGRS control processing of the embodiment;

FIG. 4 is a functional block diagram showing a specific functional configuration of the vehicle operation control processing which is applied to the VGRS control processing of the embodiment;

FIG. 5(A) is a functional block diagram showing an example of functional configuration of gear ratio computing operation at the time of additional turning shown in FIG. 4 and FIG. 5(B) is a functional block diagram showing an example of functional configuration of gear ratio computing operation at the time of turning-back shown in FIG. 4;

FIG. 6(A) is an explanatory diagram showing an example of vehicle velocity - gear ratio map shown in FIG. 5(A) and FIG. 6(B) is an explanatory diagram showing an example of steering angle velocity - gear ratio gain map shown in FIG. 5(A);

FIG. 7 is a flowchart showing a flow of the vehicle operation control processing of the embodiment;

FIG. 8 is a flow chart showing a flow of steering wheel additional turning/turning-back determining processing shown in FIG. 7; and

FIG. 9 is a functional block diagram showing the functional configuration of the vehicle operation control processing according to a comparative example.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0024]

Hereinafter, the embodiment of the vehicle operation

control apparatus which the vehicle operation control method and vehicle operation control apparatus of the present invention are applied to will be described with reference to the accompanying drawings. Meanwhile, because the vehicle operation control apparatus 20 of this embodiment is not different from the vehicle operation control apparatus 100 in terms of mechanical structure, the vehicle operation control apparatus 20 (100) shown in Fig. 1 will be described.

[0025]

As shown in Fig. 1, a vehicle operation control apparatus 20 comprises a steering wheel 21, a first steering shaft 22, a second steering shaft 23, an EPS actuator 24, a rod 25, a steering angle sensor 26, a vehicle velocity sensor 27, a torque sensor 28, an EPS ECU 30, a gear ratio changing mechanism 32, a VGRS ECU 40 and the like. Because its mechanical and electrical connections have been already described, description thereof is omitted here. Fig. 2 shows a functional block diagram showing vehicle operation control processing by means of the EPS ECU 30 and VGRS ECU 40 of the vehicle operation control apparatus 20 of this embodiment.

[0026]

As shown in Fig. 2, in the vehicle operation control apparatus 20 of this embodiment, two processings, that is, an EPS control processing 30a by the EPS ECU 30 and VGRS control processing 40a by the VGRS ECU 40 are carried out by an electronic control unit (ECU). That is, the vehicle operation control apparatus 20 has a function for controlling the steering gear ratio by means of the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 according to VGRS control processing 40a with the VGRS ECU 40, depending on the vehicle velocity. Further, it has a function of assisting steering by the vehicle driver by generating an assist force depending on steering condition by means of the EPS control processing 30a with the EPS ECU 30.

[0027]

In an EPS control processing 30a, if a steering torque signal from the torque sensor 28 and a vehicle velocity signal from the vehicle velocity sensor 27 are inputted to the EPS ECU 30, a current instruction value of the assist motor 24m of the EPS actuator 24, which is automatically determined depending on the vehicle velocity V, is determined according to a motor current map (not shown). A motor voltage corresponding to the determined current instruction value is supplied to the motor 24m by a motor driving circuit. Consequently, in the EPS actuator 24 and the EPS ECU 30, an assist force for assisting the steering by a vehicle driver is generated by the assist motor 24m through the EPS control processing 30a depending on vehicle driver's steering condition and vehicle velocity V detected by the torque sensor 28 and the vehicle velocity sensor 27.

15 [0028]

In the VGRS control processing 40a, if a steering angle signal from the steering angle sensor 26, a vehicle velocity signal from the vehicle velocity sensor 27 and an actual steering angle signal from a tire angle sensor in the EPS actuator 24 are inputted to the VGRS ECU 40 directly or through other ECU, a processing for automatically determining a usage gear ratio G_a (transmission ratio by transmission ratio changing mechanism) by the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 according to a predetermined map based on the vehicle velocity V, steering angle θ_h , steering angle velocity ω_h and actual steering angle θ_T is carried out. Then, a motor voltage corresponding to the determined rotation angle instruction value is supplied to the motor 32m by the motor driving circuit. Consequently, in the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 and the VGRS ECU 40, an output gear ratio to an input gear is changed by the motor 32m and a reduction gear 32g, corresponding to the vehicle velocity, steering angle and the like at real time and a ratio G_v of the output angle of the second steering shaft 23 to the steering angle of the first steering shaft 22 is changed.

[0029]

The basic functional structure of the vehicle operation control processing of controlling the usage gear ratio G_a (variable gain G) of the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 based on the vehicle velocity V , the steering angle θ_h , the steering angle velocity ω_h and the actual steering angle θ_T , which is a feature of the vehicle operation control apparatus 20, will be described with reference to FIG. 3.

[0030]

As shown in FIG. 3, the vehicle operation control processing by the VGRS ECU 40 comprises an output steering angle determining means 40a1, an object actual steering angle computing means 40a4, a deviation amount detecting means 40a5, an object steering angle computing means 40a6 and a VGRS object angle computing means 40a7.

[0031]

According to the vehicle operation control processing of this embodiment, the variable gain G controlled based on the vehicle velocity V , the steering angle θ_h , the steering angle velocity ω_h and the actual steering angle θ_T is multiplied with the steering angle θ_h by the output steering angle determining means 40a1 so as to determine an output steering angle. Then, an output steering angle which is a result of this multiplication is converted to an object actual steering angle θ_T^* by the object actual steering angle computing means 40a4. A deviation between this object actual steering angle θ_T^* and the actual steering angle θ_T is obtained by the deviation amount detecting means 40a5 so as to compute an angle deviation $\Delta\theta_T$. The angle deviation $\Delta\theta_T$ is converted to an object steering angle by the object steering angle computing means 40a6 and further, converted to a VGRS object angle by the VGRS object angle computing means 40a7 so as to obtain a VGRS object angle scheduled to be outputted

to the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 based on this object steering angle. In the meantime, the G_s indicated in FIG. 3 indicates a steering gear ratio which is a ratio between the steering angle θ_h and the actual steering angle θ_T , while the
5 G_v indicates a gear ratio of the reduction gear 32g which is accommodated in the gear ratio changing mechanism 32.
[0032]

Accordingly, because to in the vehicle operation control processing, the variable gain G is controlled based on not only
10 the vehicle velocity V but also the steering angle θ_h , the steering angle velocity ω_h and the actual steering angle θ_T , gain control depending on not only the vehicle velocity V but also the steering angle θ_h , the steering angle velocity ω_h and the actual steering angle θ_T can be performed.

15 [0033]

For example, as compared to a case where the vehicle velocity - gear ratio map 91 (variable gain) is controlled based on only the vehicle velocity V as seen in the functional configuration of the vehicle operation control processing of
20 the comparative example shown in FIG. 9, the variable gain G can be controlled based on the steering angle velocity by the steering wheel 21, the turning direction or the actual steering angle θ_T of the driven wheels FR, FL as well.

[0034]

25 That is, in the vehicle operation control processing of the comparative example shown in FIG. 9, the gear ratio is determined based on the vehicle velocity V by the vehicle velocity - gear ratio map 91 and the determined gear ratio is multiplied with the steering angle θ_h by a multiplying means 92 so as to
30 obtain an output steering angle. However, if it is so constructed that this output steering angle is converted to an object actual steering angle θ_T^* by the object actual steering angle computing means 40a4 and a deviation of the object actual steering angle

θT^* with respect to the actual steering angle θT is obtained by the deviation amount detecting means 40a5 so as to compute the angle deviation $\Delta \theta T$, when a vehicle driver turns the steering wheel suddenly, steering control on driven wheels is continued toward a object angle even after the vehicle driver terminates his steering operation due to a follow-up delay in control by the gear ratio changing mechanism. Consequently, the vehicle driver is supplied with a feeling of disharmony thereby his steering feeling being worsened.

10 [0035]

Thus, in the vehicle operation control processing of this comparative example, a steering angle change amount $\Delta \theta h$ in the steering angle θh is obtained by the steering angle change amount detecting means 93 and if the obtained steering angle change amount $\Delta \theta h$ exceeds a predetermined threshold θth , its excessive amount ($\Delta \theta h - \theta th$) is outputted by an object steering angle offset amount adjusting means 94 and then that excessive amount is subtracted from the steering angle $\Delta \theta h$ so as to adjust the angle deviation $\Delta \theta T$ at the time of sudden steering operation. In the meantime, this predetermined threshold θth is set up to change depending upon the steering angle velocity ωh .

[0036]

As a result, according to the vehicle operation control processing of the comparative example, if the sudden steering operation is performed, the angle deviation $\Delta \theta T$ is changed to a control object value which generates no follow-up delay by the object steering angle offset amount adjusting means 94. Thus, occurrence of phenomenon that the steering control on the driven wheels is continued even after the vehicle driver terminates his steering operation is suppressed, thereby preventing his steering feeling from being worsened.

[0037]

However, even under such a structure, if a quick steering is performed only at the time of additional turning and the steering operation is made slow at the time of turning-back, the steering angle change amount $\Delta\theta_h$ obtained by the steering angle change amount detecting means 93 does not exceed the predetermined threshold θ_{th} . Thus, that excessive amount ($\Delta\theta_h - \theta_{th}$) is not outputted by the object steering angle offset amount adjusting means 94. Thus, the angle deviation $\Delta\theta_T$ is not changed although it is changed at the time of a quick steering, however the steering control is achieved with a firstly set angle deviation $\Delta\theta_T$. However, because the steering amount of the driven wheels is different between the additional turning time and the turning-back time, although the vehicle driver performs steering operation by the same amount at the times of the additional turning and turning-back, deviation in neutral position occurs. Meanwhile, this comparative example is equivalent to the "vehicle steering apparatus" disclosed in the JP 11-208499 A.

[0038]

Thus, as shown in FIG. 4, according to the vehicle operation control processing of this embodiment, the output steering angle determining means 40a1 is so constructed that additional turning time gear ratio computing processing 41, which is capable of correcting a follow-up delay in the actual angle control on the driven wheels FR, FL due to the quick steering, is performed at the time of the additional turning operation and turning-back time gear ratio computing processing 42, which is capable of correcting a deviation in the neutral position of the steering wheel 21 is performed at the time of turning-back. The functional block of the vehicle operation control processing shown in FIG. 4 indicates an example of the structure in which the basic functional block of the vehicle operation control processing described in FIG. 3 is applied to the VGRS control processing

40a. The same reference numerals are attached to substantially the same components as those shown in FIG. 3.

[0039]

5 That is, as shown in FIG. 4, the output steering angle determining means 40a1 comprises the additional turning time gear ratio computing processing 41, the turning-back time gear ratio computing processing 42, an additional turning/turning-back determining processing 43, a usage gear ratio selecting processing 44, a multiplying processing 45 and
10 a steering angle conversion processing 46, which are executed by the VGRS ECU 40.

[0040]

The additional turning time gear ratio computing processing 41 executes a processing of outputting the gear ratio
15 G_{a1} at the time of additional turning by inputting the vehicle velocity V detected by the vehicle velocity sensor 27 and the steering angle velocity ω_h obtained by time-differentiating the steering angle θ_h detected by the steering angle sensor 26.

[0041]

20 More specifically, as shown in FIG. 5(A), the gear ratio G_{b1} corresponding to the vehicle velocity V is determined according to the vehicle velocity - gear ratio map 41a (see FIG. 6(A)), which is capable of automatically determining the transmission ratio based on the vehicle velocity V by means of
25 the gear ratio changing mechanism 32. Further, the gear ratio gain G_{b2} corresponding to the steering angle velocity ω_h is determined according to the steering angle velocity - gear ratio gain map 41b (see FIG. 6(B)), which is capable of automatically determining the gear ratio gain based on the steering angle
30 velocity ω_h . Then, the gear ratio G_{b1} is multiplied with the gear ratio gain G_{b2} so as to compute the gear ratio G_{a1} at the time of additional turning.

[0042]

For a following reason, instead of outputting the gear ratio Gb1 determined based on the vehicle velocity - gear ratio map 41a as the gear ratio Gal at the time of additional turning, the gear ratio gain Gb2 determined based on the steering angle velocity - gear ratio gain map 41b is multiplied with the gear ratio Gal.

[0043]

That is, as shown in FIG. 6(B), the steering angle velocity - gear ratio gain map 41b is set up so that when the steering angle velocity ω_h by the steering wheel 21 exceeds the predetermined value ω_{th} , the gear ratio gain Gb2 is lower (smaller) than 1 as the steering angle velocity ω_h is increased (becomes higher), so that the additional turning time gear ratio Gal can be controlled regardless of the vehicle velocity V.

[0044]

Thus, because if as shown in FIG. 6A, the vehicle velocity V is low (slow), the gear ratio Gb1 is set higher than a case where the vehicle velocity V is high (fast)(vehicle velocity - gear ratio map 41a), gear ratio Gal is set to quick in order to increase the actual steering angle θ_T of the driven wheels FR, FL even if the steering angle θ_h by the steering wheel 21 is small. However, if the steering angle velocity ω_h exceeds the predetermined value ω_{th} due to a quick steering, the gear ratio gain Gb2 becomes lower (smaller) than 1 (steering angle velocity - gear ratio gain map 41b). Consequently, the gear ratio Gal can be set to such an extent that the control by the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 can be followed up. Therefore, a follow-up delay in control due to the quick steering can be prevented.

[0045]

In the turning-back time gear ratio computing processing 42, the turning-back time gear ratio Ga2 is outputted by inputting a steering angle θ_h detected by the steering angle sensor 26

and an actual steering angle θ_T detected by the tire angle sensor accommodated in the EPS actuator 24.

[0046]

More specifically, as shown in FIG. 5B, the actual steering
5 angle θ_T is inputted to the turning-back time gear ratio computing
processing 42 as an actual steering angle θ_T' equivalent to the
steering angle after it is converted to that steering angle
through the steering angle conversion processing 46. Then, by
dividing the actual steering angle θ_T' similar to the steering
10 angle by the steering angle θ_h (i.e. calculating θ_T'/θ_h) through
the division processing 42a, the gear ratio Ga2 at the time of
turning-back is computed. That is, by paying attention to that
after the turning-back, the steering wheel 21 can be set at a
neutral position by returning the steering wheel 21 just by an
15 amount equivalent to a current actual steering angle θ_T , the
current actual steering angle θ_T is converted to the actual
steering angle θ_T' similar to the steering angle, so that the
gear ratio Ga2 which allows the turning-back by that amount is
obtained from θ_T'/θ_h .

20 [0047]

Consequently, the gear ratio Ga2 which allows the
turning-back by the same amount as the actual steering angle
 θ_T , by which the steering wheel 21 is steered additionally before,
is outputted, so that regardless of which the steering operation
25 at the time of the turning-back is slow or quick, the steering
wheel 21 can be located at the neutral position at the time of
the turning-back. Further, because the computing processing
for the gear ratio Ga2 by the turning-back time gear ratio
computing processing 42 at the time of the turning-back does
30 not depend on the vehicle velocity V, the steering wheel 21 can
be located at the neutral position even if a vehicle's traveling
velocity is changed during the turning-back operation.

[0048]

Next, the above-described vehicle operation control processing will be described about a computing processing flow through the VGRS control processing 40a by the VGRS ECU 40 with reference to FIG. 7, 8. In the meantime, this vehicle operation control processing is carried out by executing respective processings in steps S101 - S121 successively as shown in FIG. 7 and for example, executed periodically (for example, every 5 milliseconds) by timer interruption or the like.

10 [0049]

(1) Step S101

In this step, a processing for obtaining the steering angle θ_h , the vehicle velocity V and the actual steering angle θ_T is carried out. The steering angle θ_h is obtained by receiving a steering angle signal detected by the steering angle sensor 26 from the steering angle sensor 26 or other ECU. The vehicle velocity V is obtained by receiving a vehicle velocity signal detected by the vehicle velocity sensor 27 from the vehicle velocity sensor 27 or the like. Further, the actual steering angle θ_T is obtained by receiving an actual steering angle signal detected by the tire angle sensor accommodated in the EPS actuator 24 through the EPS ECU 30.

[0050]

(2) Step S103

25 In this step, a processing of detecting a steering angle velocity ω_h is carried out. This processing aims at obtaining the steering angle velocity ω_h based on a steering angle θ_h obtained from step S101 and for example, by time-differentiating the steering angle θ_h , the steering angle velocity ω_h is computed.

30 [0051]

(3) Step S105

In this step, a processing of computing a gear ratio at the time of additional turning is carried out. This processing

is carried out through the additional turning time gear ratio computing processing 41 shown in FIGs. 4 and 5A. The gear ratio Gb1 determined according to the vehicle velocity - gear ratio map 41a corresponding to the vehicle velocity V obtained through the step S101 is multiplied with the gear ratio gain Gb2 determined according to the steering angle velocity - gear ratio gain map 41b corresponding to the steering angle velocity ω_h computed through the step S103 so as to obtain the gear ratio Ga1 at the time of the additional turning. In the meantime, the vehicle velocity - gear ratio map 41a and the steering angle velocity - gear ratio gain map 41b are constituted of data table stored by a semiconductor storage unit in the VGRS ECU 40, for example. [0052]

(4) Step S107

In this step, a processing of computing a gear ratio at the time of turning-back is carried out. This processing is carried out through the turning-back time gear ratio computing processing 42 shown in FIGs. 4, 5B, in which the actual steering angle θ_T obtained in step S101 is converted to a steering angle through the steering angle conversion processing 46 and the actual steering angle θ_T' similar to the steering angle is divided by the steering angle θ_h obtained in step S101 so as to obtain the turning-back time gear ratio Ga2. [0053]

(5) Step S109

In this step, a processing of judging steering wheel additional turning or turning-back is carried out. This processing is carried out through the additional turning/turning-back judgment processing 43 described previously and executed to judge which the steering wheel 21 is turned in an additional turning direction which increases the steering angle θ_h or in a turning-back direction which decreases the steering angle θ_h based on the steering angle θ_h

and the steering angle velocity ω_h . This processing is executed according to a subroutine shown in FIG. 8. Here, this subroutine will be described with reference to FIG. 8.

[0054]

5 In the steering wheel additional turning/turning-back processing as shown in FIG. 8, in step S501, whether or not the steering angle velocity ω_h is positive is judged based on a steering angle velocity ω_h computed in step S103. Then, if it is judged that the steering angle velocity ω_h is positive (YES
10 in S501), the processing proceeds to step S503.

[0055]

 In step S503, if the steering angle velocity ω_h is positive, whether or not the turning direction by the steering wheel 21 is leftward or whether or not the relation of steering angle
15 $\theta_h > 0$ is established is judged. If this relation is established (YES in S503), because the turning direction is leftward, the processing proceeds to step S505, in which an additional turning state flag indicating that additional turning state is secured is set up.

20 [0056]

 If it cannot be judged that the turning direction is leftward through the judgment processing in step S503 (NO in S503), because the turning direction is rightward, the processing proceeds to step S507, in which a turning-back state flag
25 indicating that the turning-back state is secured is set up.

[0057]

 On the other hand, if it cannot be judged that the steering angle velocity ω_h is positive through the judgment processing in step S501 (NO in S501), because the steering angle velocity
30 ω_h is negative or zero, the processing proceeds to step S509, in which whether or not the steering angle velocity ω_h is negative is judged.

[0058]

If it can be judged that the steering angle velocity ω_h is negative in step S509 (YES in S509), the processing proceeds to step S511, in which whether or not the turning direction by the steering wheel 21 is rightward or the relation of steering angle $\theta_h < 0$ is established is judged. If that relation is established (YES in S511), because the turning direction is rightward, the processing proceeds to step S513, in which an additional turning state flag indicating that the additional turning state is secured is set up.

[0059]

If it cannot be judged that the turning direction is rightward through the judgment processing of step S511 (NO in S511), because the turning direction is leftward, the processing proceeds to step S515, in which a turning-back state flag indicating that the turning-back state is secured is set up.

[0060]

If it cannot be judged that the steering angle velocity ω_h is negative in step S509 (NO in S509), the processing proceeds to step S517, in which a steering maintenance state flag indicating that the steering is maintained is set up.

[0061]

If the state flag is set up in steps S505, S507, S513, S515, S517, a sequence of the steering wheel additional turn/turn-back judgment processing is terminated and then, the processing proceeds to vehicle operation control processing, in which the processing proceeds to step S111 in FIG. 7.

[0062]

(6) Step S111

In this step, a processing of selecting the gear ratio G_a , which is used as a transmission ratio by the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 is carried out. This processing is executed through the usage of gear ratio selecting processing 44 shown in FIG. 4

and that usage gear ratio G_a is similar to the variable gain G .

[0063]

That is, based on the state flag obtained from the steering wheel additional turning/turning-back judgment processing in step S109, which the steering wheel is in the additional turning direction, the turning-back direction or maintained is judged. If the steering wheel 21 is turned in the additional turning direction (when the additional turning state flag is set up), the gear ratio G_{a1} at the time of additional turn computed in step S105 is selected as the usage gear ratio G_a . On the other hand, if the steering wheel 21 is turned in the turning-back direction (when the turning-back flag is set up), the gear ratio G_{a2} at the time of turning-back computed in step S107 is selected as the usage gear ratio G_a .

[0064]

When the steering maintenance state flag is set up, the steering wheel 21 is maintained at a specific steering angle θ_h without being turned around and therefore, the steering angle velocity ω_h becomes zero. Because as the usage gear ratio G_a , it is permissible to select any one of the additional turning time gear ratio G_{a1} or the turning-back time gear ratio G_{a2} , it is assumed that the additional turning time gear ratio G_{a1} is selected as the usage gear ratio G_a according to this embodiment.

[0065]

(7) Step S113

In this step, a processing of multiplying the steering angle θ_h with the usage gear ratio G_a is carried out. This processing is executed through the multiplying processing 45 shown in FIG. 4, in which the steering angle θ_h obtained in step S101 is multiplied with the usage gear ratio G_a selected in step S111 through the multiplying processing 45 and its multiplication

result is outputted as an output steering angle. Consequently,
the processing by the output steering angle determining means
40a1 shown in FIG. 4 is terminated and an output steering angle
is outputted from the output steering angle determining means
5 40a1 to the object actual steering angle computing means 40a4
in a next step.

[0066]

(8) Step S115

In this step, a processing of computing the object actual
10 steering angle θT^* is carried out. That is, by dividing the
output steering angle by the steering gear ratio G_s by the object
actual steering angle computing means 40a4 shown in FIG. 4, it
is possible to obtain the object actual steering angle θT^*
corresponding to the same amount as a change amount of the steering
15 angle θ_h by the steering wheel 21.

[0067]

(9) Step S117

In this step, a processing of computing a deviation amount
between the object actual steering angle θT^* and the actual
20 steering angle θT is carried out. That is, by subtracting the
actual steering angle θT obtained in step S101 from the object
actual steering angle θT^* by the deviation amount detecting means
40a5 shown in FIG. 4, it is possible to obtain a deviation of
the actual steering angle θT with respect to the object actual
25 steering angle θT^* , that is, a angle deviation $\Delta \theta T$.

[0068]

(10) Step S119

In this step, a processing of computing the object steering
angle is carried out. That is, by multiplying the steering gear
30 ratio G_s with the angle deviation $\Delta \theta T$ computed in step S117
by the object steering angle computing means 40a6 shown in FIG.
4, the actual steering angle is converted to the steering angle,

so that the object steering angle can be obtained.

[0069]

(11) Step S121

5 In this step, a processing of computing the VGRS object angle is carried out. That is, by multiplying the gear ratio G_v of the reduction gear 32g in the gear ratio changing mechanism 32 with the object steering angle computed in step S119 by the VGRS object angle computing means 40a7 shown in FIG. 4, the steering angle is converted to the VGRS object angle and
10 consequently, the VGRS object angle is obtained.

[0070]

As described above, by executing a sequence of the vehicle operation control processing from step S101 to step S121, the vehicle operation control apparatus 20 multiplies the usage gear
15 ratio G_a , which is the variable gain G controlled based on the vehicle velocity V , the steering angle θ_h , the steering angle velocity ω_h and the actual steering angle θ_T with the steering angle θ_h , and controls the actual steering angle θ_T of the driven wheels FR, FL based on an output steering angle, which is a result
20 of this multiplication. Then, which the steering wheel 21 is turned in the additional turning direction which increases the steering angle θ_h or in the turning-back direction which decreases the steering angle θ_h is judged based on the steering angle θ_h and the steering angle velocity ω_h . If it is judged
25 that the steering wheel is turned in the additional turning direction, the additional turn time gear ratio G_{a1} is selected from the variable gain G and if it is judged that the steering wheel is turned in the turning-back direction, the turning-back time gear ratio G_{a2} is selected from the variable gain G .
30 Consequently, the additional turning time gear ratio G_{a1} or the turning-back gear ratio G_{a2} , set up individually, can be selected depending on the turning direction of the steering wheel 21.
[0071]

As for the gear ratio G_{a1} at the time of additional turning, the gear ratio G_{a1} is determined according to the vehicle velocity - gear ratio map 41a based on the vehicle velocity V and the steering angle velocity ω_h . As for the turning-back time gear ratio G_{a2} , the gear ratio G_{a2} is determined according to the steering angle velocity - gear ratio gain map 41b based on the steering angle θ_h and the actual steering angle θ_T . Consequently, as for the gear ratio G_{a1} at the time of additional turning, the gear ratio G_{a1} is determined based on not only the vehicle velocity V but also the steering angle velocity ω_h , so that the additional turning time gear ratio G_{a1} can be determined corresponding to the steering angle velocity ω_h by the steering wheel 21. As for the gear ratio G_{a2} at the time of turning-back, the gear ratio G_{a2} is determined based on the steering angle θ_h and the actual steering angle θ_T regardless of the vehicle velocity V . By dividing the actual steering angle θ_T' similar to the steering angle by the steering angle θ_h (θ_T'/θ_h), the gear ratio G_{a2} can be determined so that when the steering wheel 21 is located at a neutral position, the driven wheels are located at their neutral positions. Therefore, the steering feeling both at the time of additional turning and turning-back can be improved.

[0072]

Although the invention has been disclosed in the context of a certain preferred embodiments, it will be understood that the present invention extends beyond the specifically disclosed embodiments to other alternative embodiments of the invention. Thus, it is intended that the scope of the invention should not be limited by the disclosed embodiments but should be determined by reference to the claims that follow.